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What If Assessment Was A Gift?

July 11, 2018

Each fall when I teach a graduate course in assessment, I begin by having my students engage with a powerful article by Elaine Brouwer called “Assessment as Gift: A Vision,” in which she posits that assessment should be a gift that honors our students as image bearers.

My students and I wrestle with this idea throughout the course. It is not an easy wrestling – there are so many things about our current assessment practices that contradict this concept. Paradigms don’t shift easily. It is hard to change the way we think about assessment – both because of our experiences as students and our perceived pressures as teachers. I’d like to propose four ideas that might help to reshape the way we think about assessment such that we can indeed gift it to our students.

1. **Let’s celebrate learning, not grades:** What if instead of celebrating honor rolls, we celebrated our students’ learning. Teaching for Transformation and Expeditionary Learning model this in their “Celebrations of Learning.” These celebrations are opportunities for students to share what they have learned in public ways. “Celebrations of learning are more than a display of student work and more than a party at the end of the year. The events compel students to reflect on and articulate what they have learned, how they learned, questions they answered, research they conducted, and areas of strength and struggles.” (Berger, 2014). Celebrations of learning are powerful ways in which gifts are unfolded and explored not only by the learner but also among and with the learner’s community.
2. **Let’s set up assessment systems that lead to competency rather than measure and rank:** In my graduate classes I use a competency-based grading system. At first, my students (practicing teachers) don’t know what to make of this system. When I assess in these graduate classes, I give my students a score between 1-4 along with formative feedback to indicate their current level of competency. My assurance to them is that everyone will earn a 4 – eventually. For some, competency is achieved after one attempt; for others, two or three attempts might be needed. Because my goal for every student is that he or she successfully meet the standards of the course, I am willing to work with each student as much as is required to ensure that all have learned. I’m not interested in ranking, I’m interested in learning by my students.

3. **Let's consider that process may be as important (or even more important) than product:** In the education field, we talk a lot about core competencies and/or 21st century skills. We carefully consider what skills our students will need to be successful – not only in future employment but also as members of their communities. These skills include (but are not limited to) communication, critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving. Learning that encompasses these skills requires students to be actively involved in the process. The result is students gaining a deeper understanding of the content and discovering their passions. Project-based learning is a learning model that has gained traction because it values the process that students are invited to engage in. When assessment practices highlight the formative nature of process rather than the summative nature of product only, students value the process and develop the skills they need to flourish as image bearers.
4. **Let's invite students to own their assessment:** What if instead of thinking of assessment as something we do to students, we invited our students into the assessment process. Using formative assessment practices, we can provide regular feedback that allows us to work with students to shape ongoing learning. Involving students in formative assessment practices leads to increases in student motivation (Brookhart, 2009) and leads to students taking ownership of their learning by setting their own goals, measuring their progress toward those goals and understanding and implementing strategies that lead to successfully meeting those goals.

Brouwer concludes her article with this powerful statement: “The assessment and evaluation practices we adopt can point to the kind of life we believe Christ calls us to live or it can proclaim another way of being in the world.” Paradigm shifts are difficult but rethinking the assessment paradigm has powerful implications. Can you imagine your classroom as a place where assessment is a gift?

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